

The Rhetorical Function of Laugh Tracks in Situation Comedies: Examining Queer Shame in *Will & Grace* and *Roseanne*



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As recent world events remind us, comedy continues to act as a subversive political force. The hacking of executive email accounts in response to *The Interview*¹ and terrorist attacks on French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* over political cartoons² are but two recent large-scale examples. Popular comedic texts have the power to instigate, inform, transform, and critique values, beliefs, and institutions.³ Indeed, comedy serves as a unique and constitutive form of allowing people to see and experience their social worlds. Although large-scale cultural events make this especially evident, it is easier to forget how everyday popular entertainment has a similar, perhaps more subtle, power to provoke. Sometimes comedy can be used as a mechanism for control—such as jokes that devalue people because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, or national origin—but also as a mechanism for support, entertainment, education, self-defense, or empowerment.⁴ Additionally, comedy has implications for both identities and relationships, even if they might not always be realized.⁵

In this essay, I examine this highly-personal, world shaping, and perhaps sometimes invisible potential for comedy to construct identities and relationships. Specifically, I examine laugh track use in two highly popular television programs, *Will & Grace* and *Roseanne*, to consider how the construction of what is or is not supposed to be funny has rhetorical implications for queer identities and relationships. These texts were selected not only for their abundance of queer characters—*Will & Grace* focused on a gay man/straight woman best friend relationship and *Roseanne* featured at least one queer character each year beginning with the third season—but also because of their immense popularity. I argue that these two programs constitute what I call enduring popular culture texts, popular entertainment that continues to have social relevance throughout time as it weaves itself into a variety of cultures and becomes constitutive of social understanding. As the case studies presented here illustrate, the way enduring texts are immersed in culture might be misleading and even damaging.



Situation Comedies, Humor, and the Fool

To understand how comedy is used in *Will & Grace* and *Roseanne*, it is also helpful to consider how humor tends to function in situation comedies. As the analysis in this essay reveals, the humor in these shows—probably much like the humor in other situation comedies—relies on an audience's ability to recognize the situations being presented.⁶ That is, audiences want to understand a story even if they have not personally experienced something similar themselves. This understanding relies on a connection between a television program and the culture that experiences it. Based on its continued popularity, the notion of the urban white gay man as presented in *Will & Grace* was clearly recognizable for U.S. audiences in the late 1990s even if it would not have been as widely recognizable in earlier decades. Because an audience knows it—or, at least, feels as if they know it—there is potential to find it funny.



The humor in situation comedies—much like the humor in other popular texts—also relies on excess, or a sense that a situation or scenario is heightened beyond what is expected.⁷ In situation comedies, excess is often showcased as a heightened obstacle, sometimes to the point of being silly, that does not allow characters to have what they want. To use some classic sitcom examples, Lucy cannot wrap the chocolate fast enough on *I Love Lucy*; no matter how much he cross-dresses, Klinger cannot be sent home from war on *M*A*S*H*; and Rachel never lets Ross forget that he slept with

another woman even though they were on a break on *Friends*. In lived everyday interaction, these situations might be outlandish, awkward, or annoying – but in a comedic text, the exaggeration allows humor. As the analyses in this essay reveal, the obstacles primarily relate to characters wanting to understand what it means to be gay – but exaggeratedly, or comically, they have to work through a series of quandaries to do so.

The quandaries or mishaps that characters experience often place them in the role of being a fool. Humor theory posits that most laughs in comedy texts are the result of the person in the fool role.⁸ Comedic fools serve as what Hugh Duncan labels as “a caricature or a complete negation of our virtues.”⁹ Audiences often find humor by feeling as if they are above making the same mistakes as fools while simultaneously seeing themselves in them. To this end, audiences have the potential to learn from fools as they symbolically boast that they would make another, probably better, choice.¹⁰ In the case studies presented here, the characters and their actions serve as a conduit for audience members to, as Duncan phrases it, untangle “the mystifications of social hierarchy.”¹¹ In other words, the characters and their actions provide a reflective space for audience members to work through their own thoughts about queerness without facing the same risks experienced by those characters.

To that end, the narrative construction of who a fool is in a fictive text is important. Although some depictions of fools are more polysemic in nature, leaving audience members to decide who is wrong or right in a situation, situation comedies are more direct in their assertion of what is or is not funny.¹² Specifically, many of these shows—including *Will & Grace* and *Roseanne*—use a laugh track to point to the humor. After a character tells a joke, that joke is specified by the sound of laughter that is meant to evoke a real or recorded studio audience. The laugh track also intimates how funny a joke is based on its loudness or duration. This makes the laugh track a rhetorical tool that, in conjunction with the naturalizing and disciplining dimensions of humor, places a value judgment into a situation comedy text. By observing the laugh track, one can observe the assertions of what is right or wrong a text presents. As such, I carefully consider the use of the laugh track as part of my method for analysis.

[Laughter]

Situation Comedies and Queer Representation: Two Case Studies

Will & Grace and *Roseanne*, despite their similar focus on white queer representation,¹³ are much different texts that were introduced at different times. When *Roseanne* introduced queer characters to its landscape, the program was derided as employing cheap shock tactics.¹⁴ *Roseanne* Barr, as creator, writer, and star, faced criticism that she was simply chasing controversy. Despite being defended by queer activist organizations and academics for her nuanced portrayals of queer characters, many popular critics were skeptical. *Will & Grace*, on the other hand, was met with critical admiration and praised for bringing gay men into the homes of millions of viewers¹⁵ – similar to the recognition *Modern Family* enjoys today. Given the credit *Will & Grace* receives for contributing to queer representation, it serves as the text for the first case study in this essay. To allow a point of comparison between the two programs, each case study focuses on a story arc surrounding the communicative coming out process¹⁶ of one of its characters.



Learning How to Be Gay through *Will & Grace*

The four-episode “Fagmalion” story arc from *Will & Grace* is the text for the first case study. *Will & Grace* is a situation comedy chronicling the lives of two thirty something best friends in New York City: a gay male lawyer named Will and a straight female interior designer named Grace. The two are accompanied in their hijinks by Will’s other best friend, a gay man named Jack. Jack is often referred to as being the effeminate counterpart to Will. Grace’s bisexual secretary Karen, an alcohol- and painkiller-addicted wealthy

woman rounded out the group. The show began its run September 21, 1998 with modest ratings.¹⁷ After some patience, however, it soon turned into a hit. At its height, it was an integral part of the highly rated NBC “Must See TV” Thursday lineup including such hits as Friends and ER.¹⁸

At the close of the series after eight seasons, the show had produced 194 episodes and entered syndication in over 100 markets due to its success (where it still airs today).¹⁹ During that eight-year stretch, Will & Grace routinely finished as a top 10 program in the 18-49 year old demographic advertisers covet and reached audience levels of up to 30 million viewers for a single episode.²⁰ It has also been nominated for many Emmy awards in both writing and acting categories, collecting the Emmy for Best Comedy Series, as well as acting trophies for each of the four principle actors.²¹

The first episode of the “Fagmalion” story arc originally aired January 16, 2003 and continued over three following episodes. Each episode was named allusively to other works of popular culture: “Fagmalion



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Table 1: Will & Grace Episodes

Fagmalion Part 1: Gay It Forward https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SvO2GgmPIU
Fagmalion Part 2: Attack of the Clones https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuXTtfs0jX0
Fagmalion Part 3: Bye Bye Beardy https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cN2YlssRcQE
Fagmalion Part 4: The Guy Who Loved Me https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_h9Qa2LOFw

Part 1: Gay It Forward;” “Fagmalion Part 2: Attack of the Clones;” “Fagmalion Part 3: Bye Bye Beardy;” and “Fagmalion Part 4: The Guy Who Loved Me.” The story arc was well-received both by popular television critics and viewers, with each episode ranking in the top twenty most watched series for the week even during the competitive sweeps period.²² The arc centers upon what happens when Karen’s cousin Barry, described by characters as “overweight” and “unattractive,” comes out of the closet while in his thirties. She immediately sets him up on a blind date with Will. When that date is a failure due to Will seeing Barry as “too straight,” Karen then pays Jack and Will to

teach Barry how to be gay. Jack and Will scramble to prepare Barry for presentation to the queer community at the annual Human Rights Campaign gala, the queer social event of the year. While mentoring Barry in the ways of the gay world, Will falls in love with him. In the end, however, Barry leaves Will heartbroken. He tells Will that he needs to live the things Will lived, finding his full identity as a gay man. Only then can he hope to have a relationship.



Photo Credit: Tim Ronca [GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/jdl.html>) or CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

This stereotype of gay men as a white, shallow, appearance-oriented consumers portrayed the stereotypes about youth, looks, and social class²³ expected in representations of gay men. This critical examination of Will & Grace begins, then, by exploring how the program extends this stereotype. As one example, Karen becomes frustrated when Jack and Will are unable to teach Barry quickly how to be more embracing of the expected gay image:

Karen: Hey! What the hell did you two Mork and Mindy looking sons of bitches do to my cousin Barry? (Laugh track.) You’re supposed to help him be gay, but you didn’t finish. The poor kid’s so confused he’s sittin’ home on the couch watching football in a spandex onesy. (Laugh track.)

Will: We just got started. This is a guy who twenty-four hours ago

thought that Batman and Robin just fought crime together. (Laugh track.) We're making progress.

Karen: Yeah? Well, step it up. The Human Rights Campaign Gala is within a month. It's the social event of the gay season. Well, next to the Republican National Convention. (Laugh track.) And I want Barry to be ready for it!

Will: Karen, he's twenty pounds overweight, he shops at Miller's Outpost, and he has a beard. (Laugh track.) And I don't mean taking your mother to the Academy Awards kind of beard, I mean actual facial hair. (Laughter.)

Barry is disdainfully labeled as an "overweight," poorly dressed, and unattractive man, despite his being played by the attractive and fit actor Dan Futterman. Will also separates Barry's straight identity from Will's queerness. Karen reinforces this message with her contention that Barry is only "half" gay. Until he develops a sense of supernatural awareness that gay men are supposed to have regarding style and beauty, he will remain incomplete. This shallowness gay men are supposed to possess is not lost on Barry:

Barry: This all seems so superficial. Are gay guys only about bodies and faces?

Jack: Absolutely not. They're only about bodies. (Laugh track.) Faces you can cover up with a cute hat or a leather hood. (Laugh track.)

The absence of the laugh track following Barry's line also demonstrates that this is not a joke. Rather, in the full context of the segment, is the set-up for a forthcoming joke where Jack points out that gay men mostly care about bodies. The laugh track marks and naturalizes Barry's foolish nature for not embracing this stereotype.

Part of this emphasis on superficial beauty seems to emerge from elements that are often considered as part of the patriarchy, but that take on a new meaning when used by gay men. For example, the male gaze is naturalized in the following section of "Attack of the Clones" set in a gay bar:

Barry: You're hot. You're successful. Every guy in this bar is checking you out.

Will: No, they're not. Look, I was once where you are. (Moves Barry, exchanges spots at the bar with him). Sorry, you're blocking their view of me. (Laugh track.)

Barry's self-worth is measured here by the gaze of the male other, closely following a patriarchal model. Even Will, who is attractive and successful, thrives off the attention other eyes turn toward him. The laugh track serves to recognize this desire of gay men to be noticed for physical means and not based upon personal successes; much like heterosexual women are evaluated in patriarchal systems. These patriarchal themes emerge again in a flashback scene where Will tells Barry about his first trip to a gay bar:

Jack: (Smacks peanuts out of Will's hand). What do you think you're doing? (Laugh track.)

Will: I'm eating peanuts.

Jack: Have you lost your mind? Those are little pellets of fat. And breath. (Laugh track.) You might as well be chewing on loneliness. (Laugh track.) Have you asked anyone to dance? Have you talked to anybody? Have you done anything? (Laugh track.)

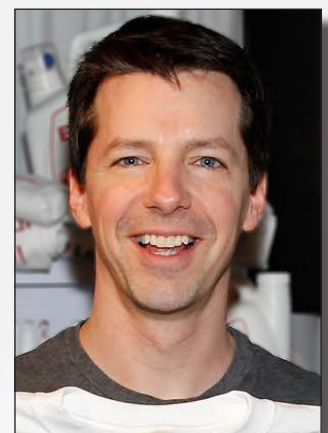


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Will: I can't. I feel like everyone's judging me.

Jack: Well, of course they are! It's a gay bar! (Laugh track.)

Much as women have been forced to worry about body image, Jack begins to scold Will for not being concerned about his. The dialogue in the situation suggests that eating food that contains fat may lead to a life of "loneliness," therefore suggesting avoiding loneliness demands being attractive. Although the hint of a positive message emerges—Jack's encouragement of Will to explore queer culture represents a genuine desire for a friend's happiness—again it is only the set up for naturalized oppression.

Still, even if the stereotypes play into patriarchal notions, it is not lost that Will, Jack, and Barry's gay male identities regularly are asserted. So, when Jack and Will are describing the type of haircut they want the stylist to give Barry, they choose to highlight elements of gay male identity both explicitly and implicitly:

Jack: This is how we want his hair cut, okay: Chunky, but not too chunky.

Will: Piecy, but not too piecy.

Jack: And gay, but not too gay. (Laugh track.)

Will: We want him to be cruised in Chelsea, but not beat up in Brooklyn. (Laugh track.)

All three descriptors of the possible hair style create a spectrum of gay and suggest that the ideal location is in the middle of that range. Doing so constructs attractiveness in the sense of being groomed and styled. But, to embrace these qualities too much means a possibility for violent social repercussions. That, in turn, problematically suggests people can somehow control exactly how gay they appear, and moreover that they might be at fault for any reactions. Disturbingly, the laugh track naturalizes violence against queers.

Moreover, the show repeatedly repeats a pattern where a) a gay character does something that could be labeled as effeminate; b) a straight person notices it and makes derogatory comment; and c) a laugh track follows. For example, in one scene Jack is running and flailing his arms. Grace notices and responds, "Now that's faggy!" The ensuing laugh track naturalizes poking fun at effeminate male behavior, as Jack is clearly the comedic fool in the situation whose behavior needs correcting. Gay men are also to blame when a heterosexual character has the potential to be the fool. For instance, when Grace sees she must walk down a small flight of stairs in her heels and complains, "For crying out loud! This is ridiculous! I just walked up a flight of stairs! What? Did they put this here just so the queens can make an entrance?"

Loud laughter follows the comment, naturalizing the referencing of gay men as queens. It is not Grace's inability to walk down the stairs that is the target of the laughter; it is the "queens" who serve as the comedic fool. Other labels given to queer males throughout the duration of the story arc include "girls," "ladies," "moes," "gal pals," "frosted mini-wheats," all naturalized by the laugh track. Actions are naturalized as well. Laugh track-enhanced dialogue in the show naturalizes



actions as well. When gay men are waiting in line to wax their eyebrows or are seen wearing pantyhose, the laugh track enters to remind viewers about their foolish nature. Rather than laughing with them, however, a distinct sense pervades that the audience is supposed to laugh at them.

Although the ideas presented in the program have the potential to serve as resistance to heteronormative culture, this potential never emerges. Rather, the use of the laugh track constructs gay men as fools because their behavior is subject to evaluation from a heteronormative culture. Although Will & Grace could have used its popularity to promote progressive values and a sensitivity toward queer persons, as this analysis reveals—similar to other academic explorations before it²⁴—that it instead ridicules and shames queer persons.

Learning How to Respond to Queerness through Roseanne

The television text used for the second case study in this exploration is the three-episode story arc dealing with Nancy's coming out experience from the popular television series *Roseanne*. Like *Will & Grace*, *Roseanne* is a half-hour situation comedy that continues to be enjoyed by a large audience. When originally on the air, it ranked among the top 5 most watched series each of its first five seasons and in the top 25 most watched series from 1988 until 1997,²⁵ every year it was on television. Although most sitcoms at the time focused on white, middle-class families with perfect lives, *Roseanne*, named after the show's star, celebrated the ups and downs of a blue collar lifestyle. The show was a tremendous success because, as critic David Plotz asserts, "the working class folks whose lives *Roseanne* claimed to depict tuned in."²⁶ Not only did the working class viewer find interest, but so did "wealthier viewers, to whom the show represented blue collar chic."²⁷

The program was bold in tackling issues that affected primarily blue collar families, such as the problem of taking off of work to visit the principal's office or getting a second mortgage. It also confronted problems that crossed socioeconomic lines. Perhaps most notably, *Roseanne* was quick to confront issues related to sex and gender. From domestic violence to self-defense, *Roseanne* examined the role of women in society as well as the role of gender in the world.

These explorations included portrayals of queer issues in an era when same-sex relationships were not widely talked about on television, especially in a situation comedy.²⁸ *Roseanne* ultimately dealt with four recurring queer characters. Two of these characters, Leon (played by Martin Mull) and Nancy (Sandra Bernhard) were recurring peripheral characters. Although not introduced as gay or lesbian, both Leon and Nancy eventually come out

to Roseanne

on the show. Another character, Roseanne's mother (Estelle Parsons), came out to Roseanne in the final season but was later revealed not to be a lesbian.²⁹

The story arc centering upon Nancy's coming out journey began November 10, 1992 with an episode titled "Ladies' Choice" where Roseanne and Jackie's good friend Nancy reveals that she is a lesbian. The following week's episode saw the storyline continue with "Stand on Your Man," an episode examining how Nancy's soon to be ex-husband, a man who ran off and left her, receives the news after returning to town, Intending to mend his relationship with Nancy, he is rebuffed and startled to learn she is dating a woman.

ROSEANNE

Table 2: Roseanne Episodes

Ladies' Choice

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SvO2GgmPLU>

Stand on Your Man

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rwXff5e4cQ>

Don't Ask, Don't Tell

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJeGKIENixE>



Photo credit: "Rosekiss" by the episode. Via Wikipedia
- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Rosekiss.jpg#mediaviewer/File:Rosekiss.jpg>

Although Nancy and her sexuality was acknowledged in many episodes in between, the final episode dealing with Nancy's coming out came March 1, 1994 with the aptly titled "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." In this episode Roseanne and Jackie accompany Nancy and her girlfriend, Sharon, to a gay bar where, eventually, Sharon flirts with and kisses Roseanne. The kiss, believed to be the first between same-sex characters on prime time television comedy, caused a media uproar.³⁰ When Roseanne first delivered the episode to ABC, they refused to broadcast it with the network's legal representative, Stephen Weisswasser, claiming, "the scene is not the lifestyle that most people lead."³¹ Tom Arnold, at the time Roseanne's husband and manager, claimed that ABC also contended the episode "violate(d) the network's standards."³² The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation interjected with a press release urging ABC to air the show. They defended ABC, characterizing it as a network that has an "outstanding record of producing quality shows that demonstrate the full spectrum of life."³³

After a bitter battle between the producers of the show and ABC television, Roseanne finally threatened to take her top-rated show to CBS. ABC buckled under the pressure, and the program aired with an adult content disclaimer. It was watched by an astounding 32 million viewers.³⁴ After all of the hoopla surrounding the episode, the furor over the kiss was dismissed by critics who claimed "it really wasn't a kiss at all, and certainly didn't represent lesbian desire."³⁵ Other criticisms included that "there was something amiss about an industry that routinely shows us women being beaten and shot but balks at showing two women kissing."³⁶ Media outlets largely dismissed the show as attention-seeking and using homosexuality for shock value.

Similar to Barry's story on *Will & Grace*, the story of Nancy on *Roseanne* avoids larger issues regarding homophobia in favor of exploring the everyday trials and tribulations a queer person may face. In that sense, the program rhetorically illustrates coming out in the context of everyday interpersonal interactions about dating, relationships, and sex. In the opening scene of "Ladies' Choice," Roseanne, who is not yet aware that Nancy is a lesbian, tries to set Nancy up with one of Dan's friends. Nancy initially refuses the date by explaining that she does not want to be set up with another of Dan's "loser" buddies. After much prompting from Roseanne, Nancy finally reveals that she must decline Roseanne's offer of matchmaking because she is seeing someone. Roseanne and Jackie press to find out who Nancy is dating, and finally she makes her revelation. Roseanne and Jackie, in line with the literature about coming out conversations,³⁷ are a bit confused:



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Roseanne: Well, it's really surprising me. When did this happen?

Jackie: (In disbelief.) Wait a minute. (Laugh track.) You and I used to go out lookin' for guys all the time. We went to all those singles dances together.

Nancy: Singles dances? I thought we were dating. (Laugh track.) Joke! Joke! Just kidding. (Laugh track.)

Already the show is demonstrating the use of a laugh track that naturalizes confusion might be part of a coming out conversation. Rather than make the queer person the fool of the situation, it points the laughter toward Roseanne and Jackie who are having a hard time making sense of it all. Returning to the theories of humor, it is Roseanne and Jackie's viewpoints that are in need of comedic correction.

This is extended later in a scene from "Ladies' Choice" where Jackie confides in Roseanne her feelings of awkwardness about the situation:

Jackie: I'm afraid I'm gonna feel weird around Nancy. I mean, what if she starts checkin' me out?

(Laugh track.)

Roseanne: Well, she probably already has. (Laugh track.)

Jackie: (Freaked out.) My God! (Laugh track.)

Roseanne: Well, you said you guys went to buy swimsuits together. (Laugh track.) Oh, relax, Jackie. It's not like she can't control herself. It's not like she's a man. (Laugh track.)

Jackie: This is so weird.

Roseanne: Well, she's still your friend, she just happens to be gay.



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As Fone³⁸ posits, the idea of a queer person being a sexual predator is a common fear among people who learn that a sexually queer individual is among them.

When Jackie makes this confession to Roseanne, Roseanne tosses Jackie's fears aside with a joke. The laugh track follows, naturalizing the idea that the notion of the queer body predator—at least one who is female—is irrational. Moreover, Jackie is the fool in the situation for thinking that queer equals predator. Roseanne, as the voice of reason, responds to Jackie's contention that the situation is "weird" by reminding Jackie that Nancy is still the same person. While noting her as the same person, she also asserts that "she just happens to be gay." This supportive statement is complex in that embraces both Nancy's new identity as well as her old one. It is also meant to be taken seriously, as the lack of a laugh track indicates.

Tolerance versus Acceptance

As the storyline continues, it is clear that Roseanne is trying to accept Nancy in her coming out process, but the show still shows her stumbling in her efforts. As Roseanne puts it, she cannot always be as "cool" about the process as she would like to be. This ability for Roseanne—the hero of the show—to make mistakes is first evident in a conversation with her daughter, Darlene. After Darlene overhears Roseanne telling Jackie that Nancy is "still your friend, she just happens to be gay":

Darlene: What's for lunch? And who's gay?

Roseanne: Loose meat. And it's none of your business.

Darlene: I probably already know anyway. It's Dr. Summers, your gynecologist. (Laugh track.)

Roseanne: (Shocked.) My gynecologist is a lesbian? (Laugh track.)

Jackie: (In a mocking tone.) Hey, she's still your gynecologist, she just happens to be lesbian. (Laugh track.)

After moment ago serving as the voice of reason, here Roseanne—as a symbol of a good person's struggle with trying to be accepting—makes a mistake of her own. Her reaction to the possibility of her gynecologist being a lesbian—a reaction that puts her in the role of the fool—



Photo credit: Glenda Sims

demonstrates that she might not be fully comfortable with Nancy's gay identity, either. This realistic portrayal naturalizes to an audience that they might not have all the answers, even if they are well intentioned.

Roseanne's struggle between tolerance and acceptance comes to a head in the third episode of the story arc. Roseanne insists on going to a gay bar with Nancy, even though Nancy has reservations about whether or not Roseanne is ready. At the bar, Roseanne has a conversation with Nancy's new girlfriend, Sharon. At the close of the conversation, Sharon kisses Roseanne. It is evident that Roseanne is uncomfortable with what happens both from the shocked expression on her face and the way she wipes her mouth after the kiss happens. Despite how the same-sex kiss made her feel, Roseanne continues to deny that she has some level of homophobic attitudes. She initially explains to Nancy that she is only upset because she was worried that Nancy would be affected by her girlfriend's infidelity. Nancy's response helps her to face reality:

Roseanne: Last night Sharon... kissed me.

Nancy: I know. She told me.

Roseanne: Oh, she did?

Nancy: Yeah. She just thought you were real cute, and she wanted to kiss you so she did. Isn't she a riot? (Laugh track.)

Roseanne: Oh. So you're not, like, upset or anything?

Nancy: No. I think that it's funny. Why? Did it bother you?

Roseanne: Well no. No. It didn't bother me. I mean, I... I pretty much knew it was funny. Ha ha. (Laugh track.)



Photo credit: Visual Poet

The laugh track following Roseanne's failed attempts at fake laughter, once again helps to naturalize a sense of what it means to be accepting. Roseanne is again the fool, and as the scene continues the narrative offers a corrective:

Roseanne: I'm not freaking out. Why would I freak out?

Nancy: Well, you know, maybe you liked the kiss just a little.

Roseanne: What? That is the most ridi... what? (Laugh track.)

Already in the scene the laugh track is naturalizing feigned shock as a reaction to a contention that may be hitting home. As the scene continues:

Nancy: Well, it's not that unusual. I mean, sexuality isn't all black and white. There's a whole grey area.

Roseanne: I know about the grey area! (Laugh track.)

Nancy: And you're afraid that just one tiny little percent of you might have been turned on by a woman. (Laugh track.)

Roseanne: That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. I am not afraid of any, uh, small percentage of my gayness inside. You know what I mean? I, I am... totally okay about whether I, I am, like... three percent or four percent... or lower. (Laugh track.)

This scene boldly naturalizes the idea that much of the discomfort or fear of associating with queers may come from a person's fears about exhibiting some homosexual tendencies themselves. This textual contention matches cultural narratives that suggest many people with homophobic tendencies react to mask their own homosexual impulses on some level.³⁹

More than that, the text from Roseanne contends that it does not mean someone is a bad person just because they may feel uncomfortable about queer sexualities. This is a message in the text that reaches in more than one direction:



Photo credit: Visual Poet

Roseanne: I didn't mean for that to sound like, it was bad or anything, ya know. Because if I was gay then it would be just fine but I'm not gay, so I just don't like for people to call me things that I'm not. Like a hypocrite. Or gay. Ya know. Because I'm not. And I wouldn't like anyone calling me, like, um, an astronaut. Because it's fine to be an astronaut. But, ya see, I'm not an astronaut. (Laugh track.)

Nancy: It's not like you have to be cool to be my friend, Roseanne. I mean, I'm not comfortable with everything about you, either. Every time I think about you and Dan in bed, ech. (Laugh track.)

Just as Roseanne admits she has some discomfort with homosexuality, Nancy admits she has problems with heterosexuality. Again, some semblance of equality—and recognition that in many cultures the thought of what people do sexually can be uncomfortable—is naturalized through humor. Roseanne's monologue also emphasizes the fluidity of sexuality and how it does not always fit neatly into socially constructed identity categories. This monologue comforts those who may not be as tolerant or accepting as they would like to be. This sophisticated and nuanced message is a far cry from the shock value asserted by media outlets and is more in line with the queer organizations who initially championed the program as well as academic critiques.⁴⁰

Discussion: Comparing Fools Across Case Studies

In comparing the analyses of the two programs, it is clear Roseanne offers a portrait of queerness that is more progressive and sensitive than *Will & Grace*. Although the characters on both programs do not always make the most sensitive or best informed choices, the characters on *Roseanne* make a genuine



attempt to offer support and understanding. This portrayal of Roseanne and Jackie's struggle is in stark contrast to *Will & Grace*. There the characters focus not on how they can help Barry for his sake, but instead on what they can gain in the situation. It is important to note that the core characters on both programs do come to accept the queer character's sexual identity on some level. Although this acceptance might be somewhat unrealistic, as unresolvable rejection and stigma are a part of the coming out process,⁴¹ it does speak for comedy's potential to help cultures deal with unresolved personal-political tensions.

Indeed, the core characters on the program accepting

queerness as legitimate and not shameful does send a naturalizing message to the viewers who enjoy and identify with these characters. What the programs construct as accepting is markedly different, however. Will and Jack demand that Barry be gay not on his own terms, but instead in terms of what society expects. Not only do they not allow Barry his identity, but they simultaneously shame the new identity he is supposed to embody as gay men, and particularly their effeminate behaviors, are made to be foolish.

On Roseanne, however, the person who is usually being laughed at is the person who is not reacting to Nancy's sexuality in a supportive or understanding manner. When Jackie begins to worry about how Nancy may have looked at her body in the past, the laugh track kicks in suggesting that the audience is laughing at Jackie's reaction, not Nancy's identity. Jackie is the fool because her doubts are unreasonable or even silly. The audience should, as rhetorically guided by the laugh track, find humor in the inability of the characters to avoid the stereotypes related to being gay or lesbian or to make judgmental or insensitive responses.

Conclusion

It is true that a hand full of television program episodes might not have a widespread positive or negative effect on societal values, but it is important to consider how shows such as Will & Grace or Roseanne are a part of the larger web of discourse that surrounds queer sexualities and how the programs—despite dominant media assertions of how they function—might be playing out for audiences. With popular and widely accepted misrepresentations such as Will & Grace, it is pivotal that a comparatively accurate and responsible representation such as Roseanne counteracts misunderstandings surrounding gay, lesbian, or otherwise sexually queer persons. As more popular culture texts related to sexualities and queer identities continue to be created, it is also to consider how they include portrayals that might be allowing a larger legacy of cultural texts that continue to push stereotypes and attitudes in a non-accepting direction. To that end, one important aspect brought forward in this essay is how enduring popular culture texts can allow for cultural fabrics to be created that allow a false sense of what those texts offer. This use of enduring popular culture texts is important, as too often studies are done using fleeting, ephemeral texts that may or may not have a continuing presence. For example, after the Supreme Court decision regarding the Defense of Marriage Act was released in 2013, many newscasts (e.g., NBC Nightly News) cited Will & Grace as one of the key influences for acceptance of non-heterosexual people.⁴² The emergence of a new family drama about a woman's transition—Amazon's Transparent—has often been referred to as something akin to “Will &



Grace for the transgender community.”⁴³

These citations—as well as its continued success in reruns and through streaming services—extends the program's legacy as progressive, innovative, groundbreaking, and quality-filled. The analysis in this essay questions whether that legacy was earned and whether it should be sustained. Moreover, it suggests that other texts held up as champions in cultural discourses might also be promoting stereotypes or unsavory portrayals. Questioning enduring popular culture texts is important.

It is just as important to consider the subtleties of sexualized discrimination, whether it be a laugh track at the end of a televised joke or other rhetorical devices in mediated texts that indicate how humor is to be received. As the beginning of this essay asserted, humor has much potential as a world-controlling political device. The jokes that make up this political humor as well as its implications have been analyzed by many scholars. As

this essay's analysis suggests, however, the totality of these texts—and perhaps accompanying paratexts⁴⁴—have not been fully considered. Laugh tracks are but one tool that can be used in popular culture tools to assert what is or is not funny. It becomes important, then, to consider how humor is rhetorically constructed beyond the jokes or punch lines. What are the other indicators that tell us whether or not something is supposed to be funny? How do those indicators position our ideologies? And how might they be hidden from criticism?

As this essay demonstrates, laugh tracks rhetorically shape the personal-political social worlds of queer identities and relationships. They undoubtedly shape many other political understandings as well.

End Notes

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- ⁶ John Forester, "Critical Moments in Negotiations: On Humor, Recognition, and Hope," Faculty Webpage, last updated February 12, 2003. Retrieved from <http://people.cornell.edu/pages/jff1/Pon.htm>
- ⁷ Berger, "Humor," 6.
- ⁸ Hugh Daziel Duncan, *Communication and Social Order* (New York: Oxford University, 1970), 400.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, 401.
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- ¹² Ken Sanes, "Situation Comedies and the Liberating Power of Sadism," *Transparency*. <http://transparencynow.com/sitcom.htm>
- ¹³ Michael Green, "Screenwriting Representation: Teaching Approaches to Writing Queer Characters," *Journal of Film & Video* 65 (2013), 30-42. doi:10.1353/jfv.2013.0014
- ¹⁴ The File Room, "Roseanne Kiss," *The File Room*, last updated 2004. <http://www.thefileroom.org/documents/dyn/DisplayCase.cfm/id/236>
- ¹⁵ For one of many accounts see Lynn Elber, "Goodnight Gracie: 'Will & Grace' Ends Landmark Run," *San Diego Union Times*, last updated May 6, 2006. <http://legacy.utsandiego.com/news/features/20060509-1549-ca-tv-will&gracefinale.html>
- ¹⁶ For more about interpersonal communication and coming out, see Tony E. Adams, *Narrating the Closet: An Autoethnography of Same-Sex Attraction* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast, 2011).
- ¹⁷ Elber, "Goodnight Gracie."
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁹ The program has been available in local syndication, on WGN and Lifetime, and is currently airing on WeTV and Logo. For a full history of the program's syndication, as well as a general history of the show, visit "Will & Grace," *Wikipedia*, last updated January 9, 2015. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_%26_Grace
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- ²¹ Television Academy, "Will & Grace," *Emmys.com*. <http://www.emmys.com/shows/will-grace>

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- ²⁴For notable examples featuring different arguments than this essay, see Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow, "Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces: Will and Grace and the Situation Comedy Genre," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 1 (2002): 87-105; or Thomas J. Linnemann, "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Will Truman? The Feminization of Gay Masculinities on Will & Grace," *Men and Masculinities* 10, no. 5 (2007): 583-603.
- ²⁵Brian Ford Sullivan, "Ratings Series Tracker," *The Futon Critic*, retrieved from The Futon Critic website: <http://www.thefutoncritic.com>
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- ²⁷*Ibid.*
- ²⁸Larry Gross, *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia University, 1994), 90.
- ²⁹In the final episode of *Roseanne* viewers learn that the entire final two seasons of the series were figments of Roseanne's imagination to help her cope after Dan, her husband, passed away. According to Roseanne's final monologue in the final episode of the series, Jackie later came out to Roseanne as lesbian. Her mother was not actually a lesbian, but to cope with life and to indulge her creative approach to writing, Roseanne acknowledges she decided to make her mother one.
- ³⁰*Ibid.*
- ³¹Quoted in GLAAD, "Action Alert: '...It Is Not a Lifestyle Most People Lead,'" GLAAD/Denver, last updated May, 1994. <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/orgs/GLAAD/old/denver/roseanne.action.alert-05.94>
- ³²Quoted in The File Room, "Roseanne Kiss"
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- ³⁴Gross, *Up*, 89.
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- ³⁷See, for example, the literature review in Jimmie Manning, "Coming Out Conversations and Gay/Bisexual Men's Sexual Health: A Constitutive Model Study" in *Left Out: Health Care Issues Facing LGBT People*, Vickie L. Harvey and Teresa Housel, eds. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014). doi:10.13140/2.1.1867.8089
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- ³⁹Warren J. Blumenfeld, *Homophobia: How We All Pay the Price* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 2.
- ⁴⁰For notable examples, see Bonnie Dow, "Ellen, Television, and the Politics of Gay and Lesbian Visibility," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18, no. 2 (2001): 123-140; and S. D. Walters, "Take my Domestic Partner, Please: Gays and Marriage in the Era of the Visible," *Queer Families, Queer Politics: Challenging Culture and the State*, Mary Bernstein and Renate Rimann, eds. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001): 338-357.
- ⁴¹See Jimmie Manning, "Communicating Sexual Identities: A Typology of Coming Out," *Sexuality & Culture* 19, no. 1 (2015): 122-138. doi:10.1007/s12119-014-9251-4 or Jimmie Manning, "Positive and Negative Communicative Behaviors in Coming

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⁴⁴ For example, how might a movie poster refocus a rhetorical analysis? How might a toy associated with a cartoon-or vice-versa—change the reading of one or both? Media scholars have started to ask these types of questions. See, for example, Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York, NY: New York University, 2010).